

## PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Mr. J. BOWMAN : It is now my pleasure to call upon the President, Mr. Will Lawther, to deliver his annual address.

Mr. W. LAWATHER (President) :

FELLOW DELEGATES :

As on the last two occasions when we have met to hold our Annual Conference, we are limited to three days as a grim reminder of the fact that the dour, determined battles of the Free Nations continues against the barbaric forces of Hitlerism and Fascism. We face the reality that the world we desire, and the free life we need, can only be achieved by the overthrow of all who stand against us.

The report of the Executive Committee draws your attention to those in your ranks who have passed beyond. One of the best known of these was the old-timer William Straker, for many years the General Secretary of the Northumberland Miners, and a member of your Executive Committee. His record of work done for the miners is to be found in practically every annual volume of the M.F.G.B. In his handling of the evidence for the Federation for the Nationalisation of the Mines at the historic Sankey Commission of 1919, he laid bare the glaring inequalities of the anarchy of our present system and pointed out the pathway that would have given the nation to-day the coal it needed. Alas, the pioneer and his ideals were not accepted, but none the less there remains the evidence that Northumberland's grand old man laid down. Then there is Willie Lunn, who for long years was Miners' M.P. for Rothwell, and who, like William Straker, was a real pioneer in the political Labour world. Called to high office, he demonstrated in his quiet, practical way, the fitness of Democracy to carry on as administrators. Edward Hawkes of Scotland, and others, are enshrined in the memory of all who knew and laboured with them. They lived every moment of their lives for their fellows. We desire to place on record our tribute to well-spent lives in the service of their folk.

To the far too large number of our members who have met their death in the pits we pay our homage, and hope, as shall be indicated

later this week, that the changes in the future organisation of the Mines will prevent such a terrible toll of human lives—often at an age when they should be learning and enjoying the meaning of the way of the good life.

## WAR

To-day mankind is witnessing death on an unprecedented scale in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of human souls as never before in human history. Those who have not thought of the price that the flower of mankind is paying for them in this struggle of the United Nations must indeed have sunk below the level of the animal kingdom. On land, sea, and in the air destruction and death have come to your comrades—citizens of the United Nations fighting to maintain their right to free speech and public assembly.

Especially do we refer to that mining village of Lidice in Czechoslovakia, where for the death of a human fiend named Heydrich, nigh every human soul has been wiped out. For that foul carnage of Lidice, for the butchery of Russian workers, for the suffering and toil that Fascism has imposed, we not merely bow our heads in silence, but renew our pledge to wipe out the slayers. Those assassins of liberty must pay the penalty.

(The Delegates stood for a few moments in silence.)

## CHANGES IN THE INDUSTRY.

At last year's Annual Conference a resolution was carried seeking for national control of our industry ; for an increase in wages and for a national minimum wage. To-day for the first time at an Annual Conference, we meet with the knowledge of having secured what many had come to regard as merely pious annual resolutions. Control of the mines is now accepted by the nation ; public ownership of royalties is a fact. Indeed, the first steps have been taken to carry through in a practical form the ideals we have urged at many an Annual Conference. Miners prefer these practical steps in cash to the tap-dancing of the intellectuals on ideological staircases. The increase of wages that has taken place nullifies practically all the discrepancies and anomalies existing a few months ago as between mining and other industries. A national minimum weekly wage is also established for which we have fought many battles. The final phases are being worked out for a National Wages Board for which we stood long weeks of struggle. We have not only been living through the period of seeing historical changes being enacted, we ourselves have been making them ; National Control, increase of wages, a national minimum and a National Board bringing to us definite rights, but they also bring new duties and responsibilities. Some of our members will be at the controls of the machinery whereby these historic changes are taking place. They are now being called

upon to carry into working-day practice the methods that will give the results which for many years we have claimed could be accomplished. As they are doing their part, let everyone here assembled, and every member we represent in the organisation, do his part too. Responsibility and duty cannot be delegated or relegated to someone else—that is the dodger's way. We have to accept the task and above all give this nation the coal it needs. Gone are the times for those who believe that changes are wrought by words, or the utterings of platitudes. The shirker of responsibility to-day is the saboteur of to-morrow; the hesitator is the doubter and can never be accepted as a substitute for a man of action. Evasion may be covered up by fine phrases, but evasion it will remain. We pledged our word, we expressed our faith that the changes we have obtained would help to give the coal needed day by day. If we fail, it will be a long, long day before the nation again listens in patience to any of our proposals. We must not and we cannot allow vested interests of any kind to interfere with the nation's needs whenever they arise. And these changes in the economic structure of the industry mean that there must be organisational changes in the Federation. The Bow-and-Arrow Trade Union cannot function with a dive bomber economic coal organisation. It savours too much of the days that are dead and gone for ever to say that it is impossible to make changes in our own organisation. Just as events of the past ten years have made it incumbent upon every nation that measured progress by the health of its people, the better educated its ordinary folk became, the more they have been forced to use this health and community well-being for guns to keep their existing standards; and so must the Trade Union Movement in general, and we as miners in particular, face the logic of change. Here are economic and structural changes in the means whereby we derive our livelihood that dictate relentlessly the next step. To-day's changes demand we take it or the future will surely compel it.

### SAFETY IN THE MINES

Other aspects of mining life must be examined, particularly in relation to safety and health measures. The death and accident rate must be reduced. Every factor making for safety must receive the utmost consideration. We feel that in the reorganisation plans now going through the absolute and utmost endeavour will have to be made to eliminate this human toll of life that has given this industry such a name that youths come to regard it as the last job to be accepted. Steps must be taken to put into operation a Boys' Charter, such as the Federation has put forward on behalf of the youth in the industry before the Committee set up by Mr. Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour. A lead has been given by too few Coal Companies in the past in this direction. To those far-seeing ones who have made the venture we will continue to help and urge the nation to follow their wise lead. Better to act for safety than to talk safety. Too often "Safety First"

as a slogan remains, when only the shadow is discerned and the substance never realised. It is now accepted what this vital industry will have to do if it is to play the part in the nation's task, both to-day and in the future—that it must regard the human element as human factors. How can it begin that task better than giving its youth security, training and safety measures as put forward by the Mineworkers in the industry? The miner speaks with knowledge and understanding based on experiences of his own, and has a real regard for his industry. Those who are the unfortunate victims of accidents in the industry must have immediate redress of their grievances by the adoption of those resolutions on the agenda for more adequate compensation. It ought not to take Parliament more than the time necessary to say this, to pass a measure to have this evil of worry and financial anxiety because he has been injured, removed; no interests should be allowed to interfere with this human and humane step. We have seen in one part of the coal field what can be done by wise, far-seeing, courageous adoption of measures for dealing with the lame and injured by the establishing of fracture clinics and rehabilitation centres. It ought to be regarded as a crime to allow the human wrecks the industry made in its early stages to continue to-day when it can be avoided. And as medical skill has demonstrated that you must take away the dull, drab monotonous features to restore a man, surely nothing will retard that progress to be a fit man again more than the knowledge that every day he is off work he is getting into debt because of the miserable, inadequate compensation payments he is receiving. The Miners' Welfare Movement has shown what a levy of a penny a ton on coal can do, and not much more than a few coppers per ton in terms of cash will give practically all the fracture clinics, rehabilitation centres and the increased compensation payments needed. How much is a nation worth that values its injured and broken miners at less than a few pence per ton of the coal they bring to the surface? The legislature must answer the cry of the injured—those who lie under sentence of death by silicosis—those whose vision is impaired by nystagmus—by immediate redress. No consideration can be shown to those who place their insurance profits before these victims of the bowels of Mother Earth.

These, Fellow Delegates, are the immediate problems that must have attention. To those who enjoy seats in Parliament, where live these members of ours who have come to regard themselves as forgotten men, we demand and urge that they give to-day this question their attention.

Never before in our island history has the common man, the ordinary folk, responded so willingly to the call for sacrifice to do or die for those ideals that will be translated into terms of life, liberty, and freedom from want or fear. They are doing it because they know that this is their hour. The sacrifice in blood and treasure by Soviet Russia has inspired our folk as nothing before in history. The fate meted out by the Nazis to those countless thousands of peasants and workers in towns

and villages of Soviet Russia, the horrors perpetrated by the foul fiends of barbarism must be wiped out.

Hitler has left a mark that will take generations to eradicate. The wicked slaughter of our fellow miners in Czechoslovakia, the wiping out of generations of lovers of freedom in all lands they have stolen, leave a stain in the pages of history of the name of Germany. That is their Black Record. Let those who spend their time trying to explain away these murders understand that workers of Britain are not engaged in any of those stunts of observation and scientific detachment so beloved by the scions of intellectual star-gazing, but will remember these crimes against their class. That is the cardinal issue—the Nazis and the Fascists hate those who believe in freedom and liberty. And who believes in freedom and liberty more than the workers? Others may pay greater praise to it, may sing of its glories, but to us it is life itself. It is the way, it is the hope, it is the dawn of the day that leads to human happiness. And we are resolved that if liberty and freedom are to perish from the face of the earth, then far, far better will it be to perish than to live without Liberty and Freedom.

At this moment there is not one amongst us who can imagine the price that is being paid in this struggle of the United Nations; the frontiers of the past seem broken beyond repair. States that a few years ago were regarded as eternal have been trampled into dust. The might of the mechanised forces of the world are at a stage that will make it impossible for the life we knew to be lived again. Gone beyond repair are the boundaries of yesterday in any of the domains that mankind halted at before he ventured on the next stage. That is the positive, inescapable fact. Just as events demonstrated to all who believed in isolationism that their doom was sealed, so must everyone realise that this world struggle of the United Nations must, once the black, foul reactionaries are destroyed, be made the beginning for real positive changes in the life of the Common Man. To-day's struggle is understood and interpreted by the Vice-President of the U.S.A., Henry A. Wallace, when he said a few months ago :—

“ This is a fight between a slave world and a free world. Just as the United States in 1862 could not remain half slave and half free, so in 1942 the world must make its decision for a complete victory one way or the other.”

Then he continued, and in a phrase that will rank as one of the great utterances in history :—

“ The march of freedom of the past 150 years has been a long drawn-out people's revolution. In this Great Revolution of the people, there were the American Revolution of 1775, the French Revolution of 1792, the Latin-American revolutions of the Bolivarian era, the German revolution of 1848, and the Russian revolution of 1917. Each spoke for the common man in terms of blood

on the battlefield. Some went to excess. But the significant thing is that the people groped their way to the light. More of them learned to think and work together."

In this year of 1942 that spirit lives in the efforts of the United Nations to smash and to destroy the dark and evil forces of Fascism and Nazism, who would starve the common man and destroy the soul of the common people. We have resolved that we shall not be destroyed and that we shall produce the coal the nation needs to restore Liberty and continue Freedom's march. To do less we cannot—it would be to play Hitler's game, it would help the enemy. Miners of Britain, your duty is clear, definite, plain and unmistakable: it is never to lose the chance to do your share every minute in every way you can of getting coal to supply munitions to kill Fascism.

Fellow delegates, at the moment of finishing these remarks I listened, like you, to the news. I heard, as you had heard too, of the way in which our troops were fighting back in Egypt, of how in Russia in the Don Valley, where many of you, like myself, had visited in happier days, your comrades and mine were fighting for their lives and homeland and for yours too. I thought of the years they had struggled on their way to the light, as Henry Wallace, the Vice-President of the United States of America, had described it. And I thought that nothing we had ever done, nothing we had suffered, nothing we had ever endured could equal what those miner colleagues of ours were suffering and enduring. Let us therefore this day resolve that no words of ours, no action we shall take, shall stain their heroic resistance to Fascism and Nazism. In that spirit let your actions in these days of Conference coincide, so that in the days when once again free men and women meet they shall be able to say of us, we were with them in spirit, in deed and in action.

And if on reflection you think this language of mine is too strong and is not related to the stern, hard facts of reality, then my last words to you are from the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* of a few days ago, which said :—

" The threat which the German Fascist scoundrels have brought to our country has not passed. As on the first day of the war, so to-day it is a matter of the life and death of the Soviet State, the life and death of the peoples of the U.S.S.R. It is a question whether the peoples of the Soviet Union should be free or become slaves. The enemy is cruel and inexorable. The atrocities committed by the German Fascist fiends are not dying down and these beasts' crimes are multiplying daily."

There from the battle front, there from the Fatherland of Socialism comes the grim warning, and if I know my countrymen, my fellow miners, the response will be that the mark of the Fascist Beast shall be obliterated. All we have, all we can give, shall be freely given in order

that freedom of the common people, liberty of the common man shall not perish but shall live for evermore to exalt and enrich all mankind.